

A portrait of Spirit

One of SBHAO's 1994 Dr. E. Bruce Hendrick Scholarship recipients recently took Italy by storm

By Lori Cooper

SPIRIT SYNOTT DOESN'T HAVE TO WORK VERY hard to live up to her name. She adopted the pseudonym Spirit in high school to sign her artwork and has learned to overcome obstacles and demonstrate leadership skills like few others her age.

"I'm not shy," says the Toronto-born Synott, 31. "When you want to integrate into society, you just have to go and do it."

An Ontario College of Art graduate, Synott classifies herself as a "communications specialist," citing that her artistry, music composition and other talents help in her ultimate goal of creating awareness.

"I feel very strongly about the integration of all people," she says. "Everyone has something to offer and we all have the right to be heard."

During her five years of study at OCA, she constantly fought to get from place to place and to educate her peers to be sensitive to her special needs. Synott spent the past school year in OCA's off-campus program in Florence, Italy — the first North American student (from 64 universities and colleges) who has used a wheelchair to tackle the Renaissance city.

"I really took Italy by storm. I think I surprised a lot of people by integrating right into the community, learning the language, asking for help. I didn't go to change Italy. I went to learn about expressing myself."

Back home, the petite, fair-haired Synott is busy consolidating 18 journals she kept in Florence. Writing is an everyday labour of love for her, in between her ongoing art efforts and modelling stints.

Synott is also an active public speaker for charitable causes, including the Disabled Women's Network, WENDÓ (self-defence classes she's taught for women, both able-bodied and those with disabilities), and the Endangered Animal Sanctuary.

"I can relate to the animals being locked in a cage. I think sometimes that's how people view me in the wheelchair."

Synott works out at Variety Village regularly, drives a van with hand controls and frequently goes out dancing with her friends, doing "wheelies" on the dance floor.

"I don't think I'm better than anybody else," she says. "Nothing is handed to anyone. We all have to work at it. I do what I do because nobody will do it for me, and I focus on what I have, not what I don't have."

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DR. E. BRUCE HENDRICK SCHOLARSHIP

The Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus Association of Ontario is now accepting applications for the Dr. E. Bruce Hendrick Scholarship.

Established in 1990 as a tribute to Dr. Hendrick's dedication and service to association members, it is open to students with spina bifida and/or hydrocephalus who are continuing on to post-secondary education.

Application forms:

SBHAO • 35 McCaul St., Ste. 310 • Toronto, Ont. M5T 1V7

416/979-5514 • 1-800-387-1575 • fax: 416/979-0849

Application deadline: March 29, 1996.